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# Editorials

## Is poison safe?

We should by now be accustomed to the fact that we are engaged in the regular production of hydrogen bombs, nerve gases and other poisons useful to the waging of war. Large quantities of these weapons are presumably stockpiled in arsenals all over the country, and, according to the Defense Department, they're perfectly safe. No accidents are possible.

Yet two recent incidents indicate that many people don't really believe the Pentagon's reassurances, and that the Pentagon doesn't fully expect to be believed.

The first incident was the tragicomedy of the four hydrogen bombs that fell on the coast of southern Spain, when two American planes collided in midair last January. One of the four bombs couldn't be found, but, since there had been no explosion, there seemed no basis for the rumors that the area had been contaminated by radioactive materials. Only several weeks after the accident did officials disclose that two of the recovered bombs had broken open in the fall, scattering radioactive plutonium and uranium over 18 acres. No danger at all, officials kept saying, as they scooped up 1,500 cubic yards of contaminated topsoil to be shipped to a dumping ground in South Carolina. While searchers continued hunting for the fourth bomb offshore—where they finally found it lying in 2,500 feet of water—the U.S. ambassador went swimming nearby to show everybody that everything really was perfectly safe.

What, then, was all the excitement about? The assumption seems to have been that the missing bomb might blow up after all, and that Government statements on the subject may be taken with a grain of salt. If this is the case, we are indeed in a sorry plight. For we have stockpiled so many bombs that, if the military's safety precautions really can't be counted on, we might as well kneel down every night to pray that the country will survive to see another dawn.

Yet no sooner had the Spanish incident been closed than the United States Geological Survey stated that a series of minor earthquakes around Denver "probably are related" to the fact that the U.S. Army dug a two-mile hole into the Rockies to dump dangerous wastes from the manufacture of deadly nerve gases. This interesting announcement prompted some inquiries, but a spokesman at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal would say only that the arsenal was "engaged in preparation of munitions in very sensitive areas." And there was no indication of what was in the 150 million gallons of poisonous wastes that the Army had been pumping into the hole for the past four years.

The Defense Department has a right and duty, of course, to keep secret all details of the production of new weapons, particularly nuclear warheads and poison gases. It has a right, too, to try to prevent the hysteria that inevitably surrounds all talk of accidents involving these dreaded weapons. However, accidents do happen, and when they do happen, the public will find out about them. To the extent that the military is less than candid on the subject, the public will be less than confident about the truth of official statements.